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QUESTION ON THE REALIZATION IN ALL COUNTRIES OF THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS CONTAINED IN THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND IN THE INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS, AND STUDY OF THE SPECIAL PROBLEMS WHICH THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES FACE IN THEIR EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE THESE HUMAN RIGHTS

QUESTION OF THE REALIZATION OF THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

Written statement submitted by the International Federation Terre des Hommes, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[31 January 1991]

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1. Nowhere in the developing world are the contrasts between poverty and wealth more striking than in Latin America. Despite average per capita incomes that are five or six times higher than those in south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, nearly a fifth of the population still lives in poverty. This is due to the region's extreme degree of income inequality. According to the World Bank 1/, 0.7 per cent of regional GDP - the approximate equivalent of a 2 per cent income tax on the wealthiest fifth of the population - would be enough to raise the incomes of all the continent's poor just above the poverty line.

2. Latin America has not succeeded in escaping from its ten-year trend towards low rates of growth and falling per capita incomes since 1989. The average income growth in 1989 was 1.5 per cent, but this figure conceals great disparities over the region. 2/ Debt remains a major obstacle to growth: net resource transfers from the countries in the region to their creditors have risen to almost a fifth of their export earnings. In addition, measures taken to reduce the fall in consumption have produced a corresponding reduction in investment, the level of which is 27 per cent lower today than it was at the beginning of the 1980s.

3. Several Latin-American countries have experienced periods of profound political and economic upheaval intended to satisfy both social aims, especially a redistribution of income, and populist and nationalist political ideals. Paradoxically, however, it has often been the social groups that were meant to benefit that have ultimately suffered the most from such changes.

4. The difficult economic situation has repercussions at every level, and especially as regards human rights. It goes without saying that people living in extreme penury find practically all their economic, social and cultural rights ignored. The extreme poverty of many inhabitants of Latin America also has adverse repercussions on their enjoyment of civil and political rights and gives rise to injustice, instability and violence. The poor are treated as insignificant and do not have the necessary means to put their situation right. The same goes for those who ask for their economic, social and cultural rights to be respected, whether they be rural workers or trades unionists. In some Latin-American countries, their activities are very often violently repressed.

5. Popular participation is acknowledged to be essential for development, and initiatives by individuals and local communities could lead to great improvements in the economic situation of the region's inhabitants. But such participation involves a willingness on the part of their Governments, or any other force exercising authority, to encourage and protect the efforts made by members of local organizations and to defend them against victimization.

6. In Colombia, about a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line. First among the victims of this situation are naturally the children. In Colombia's towns, people are exposed to malnutrition, disease, lack of care, isolation and violence. The difficult economic situation breeds endemic violence within society. Arrests, disappearances and massacres of rural workers are continuing, as also is the flight of displaced persons to other parts of the country due to internal disorder, bombings, increasing militarization and the death threats to which they are subjected. Such displaced persons have to face disruption of their social and family lives and often the loss of their few resources.

7. In Antioquia department, severe repressive measures are being directed primarily against rural workers and members of political or trade-union associations. Unfounded accusations are frequently made under the "anti-terrorist" law, and victims may well be detained for lengthy periods. This situation occasions economic and family problems (dismissals from work, for example).

8. Poverty-related violence is encountered in many other Latin-American countries, as are obstacles to popular participation. In Peru, for example, Marcelino Valencia was murdered in the district of Santo Tomás in September 1990. A graduate in law and political science, Marcelino Valencia was a member of the Peasant Legal Council established to defend the economic and social rights of under privileged rural workers by an organization linked with one of the member movements of the International Federation Terre des Hommes. In the absence of an official inquiry, there is every reason to believe that Marcelino Valencia was murdered by police officer Miguel Alva Quiroz at the very police station to which he had gone to defend a rural worker who had been arbitrarily arrested. The latter was also murdered.

9. In Brazil, many inequalities are apparent. A considerable number of the measures taken by the President of the Republic elected in November 1989 to revive the country's economy have had the opposite effect: unemployment, wage-freeze, inflation, loss of purchasing power, sackings, filings for bankruptcy, etc. The country's socio-economic environment has deteriorated and social inequality has increased in both rural and urban areas. Brazil now has:

Twenty one million illiterates;

an infant mortality rate of 85 per thousand;

nine million homeless;

eighteen million abandoned children;

566 land disputes;

an external debt in the order of 115 thousand million dollars. 3/

10. Interregional disparities are also very marked in Brazil. The north-east region, for example with 27 per cent of the total population, has more than a half of the country's under privileged. In this one region, in 1989 there were 166 disputes over land, involving 779,150 hectares and affecting 74,575 people; 17 of the latter were murdered and 95 suffered all kinds of victimization (death threats, torture, murder attempts, etc.). 4/ Such disputes are bound up with the heavy concentration of land in the hands of a few families and the lack of any political will to make radical reforms to the Brazilian agrarian system.

11. It is true that Brazil has encouraged agriculture and achieved rapid growth in this sector. However, the results of its campaign against poverty are disappointing. This is explained in part by its measures relating to taxation and subsidized credit, which benefit large-scale farmers at the

expense of the labour force. The agricultural policy pursued has reduced the demand for labour and made it virtually impossible for a poor person to obtain land and become a farmer. The living conditions of landless rural workers are thus very precarious and, when they try to organize themselves to remedy the situation, they run the risk of having their activities violently repressed and suffering all kinds of reprisals at the hands of the private militias financed by large landowners. That has been the fate of several organizations working in partnership with certain member movements of FITDH.

12. Finally, on the strength of all the above, FITDH would like to recommend that the Commission on Human Rights invite all Governments concerned to:

(a) encourage and respect the development work performed by local social organizations without suspecting them of subversion a priori;

(b) recognize that the activities of such organizations contribute to the development of their countries rather than compromising it;

(c) encourage rather than hinder the organizational efforts of such social activists; and

(d) to guarantee their right to popular participation by protecting them from victimization of any kind.

Notes

1/ World Development Report 1990, page 141.

2/ Figures provided by the World Bank.

3/ Figures provided by UNDP, the World Bank, the Brazilian non-governmental organization CEDAC and the Pastoral Land Commission.

4/ Figures provided by the Pastoral Land Commission.